

**An Oral History**

**with**

**David Carstens**

**SSC History Project**

**Interviewer: Martin Oramous**

**2005**

# Biography

David Carstens is the Director of the Business Management Directorate at Stennis Space Center. He graduated from Kent State University in 1973 with a Bachelor's degree in Mathematics and Psychology. He graduated from Ohio State University in 1979 with a Master's degree in Public Administration.

He entered civil service as a Presidential Management Intern and served in various roles at Marshall Space Flight Center from 1979-2001. He came to the John C. Stennis Space Center in 2001 as the Deputy Director of Center Operations. He served as the Manager of External Affairs from 2002-2003. He served as the Acting Director of the Earth Science Directorate from 2003-2004. He became the Director of the Business Management Directorate in 2004.

Dave is the recipient of distinguished awards and honors including the NASA Exceptional Service Medal and the NASA Certificate of Appreciation.

## An Oral History

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*This is an interview by the Stennis Space Center History Office. The purpose of this interview is to document the story of key personnel during/after Hurricane Katrina at SSC. The interview is with David Carstens and is taking place on December 13, 2005. The interviewer is Martin Oramous. Also present are Paul Foerman and Shelia Reed.*

**DAVID CARSTENS:** My name is David Carstens. I'm the Director of the Business Management Directorate here at Stennis Space Center.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** Where were you when you first realized the storm was going to be a bad one and you might need to do something that you haven't ordinarily done?

**DAVID CARSTENS:** For me the storm preparations were rather late because my daughter got married a couple of weeks before the storm. We had lots of visitors in town. The visitors left the Wednesday before the storm and my daughter and her new husband returned from their honeymoon the same day. So, they were in town until Saturday before the storm. That happened to be my birthday so we had a celebration and they were leaving for London. So, until they left for London on that Saturday afternoon, flying out of New Orleans, we were rather unaware of the seriousness of the storm. The last I had heard of it was it was coming across the tip of Florida. We hadn't paid a lot of attention to it until that Saturday night. We learned about it Saturday night and then again when we watched the news on Sunday morning, we realized this was serious. It was coming our way, we had to prepare for boarding and basically get out of town. I live in an old shotgun house that has large shutters that close. I closed all the shutters and closed up the house. I did all of those things that you are supposed to do. I have boards already cut out to fit the doors. That was all put up. One of my big issues was a large sailboat that I owned that I had moved down to my house from Slidell for the wedding and it was just sitting on the bulkhead down at the harbor. I acquired a slip for it back in the Bayou and moved it back there and tied it up the best I could. We then evacuated.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** What area is this?

**DAVID CARSTENS:** This was Bayou Castine in Mandeville. We didn't have a specific place that we were going to go and evacuate to. We had several options but didn't want to get too far away so we ended up going to Clinton, LA with a neighbor of ours. They got hit somewhat but a lot less with the storm. They lost power and they had 4 or 5 families living there with them. They did have a generator. The other families were all from New

Orleans and were glued to the satellite T.V. trying to find out what had happened to their homes. We were getting actually no information out of St. Tammany Parish. We eventually ended up moving after a couple of days to Baton Rouge. These people that we evacuated to their house had a home in Baton Rouge. They found out they had power so a couple of the families moved down to the Baton Rouge house. Wednesday or Thursday after the storm, I decided it was time to come home. We had word that you couldn't get through and we certainly couldn't get through to Mississippi so we couldn't come over to the Stennis Space Center. So, I ended up trying to do as best I could to get home. I got within several miles of the house and decided to walk in dodging a lot of trees and down power lines and such. When I got to the house I discovered that I had quite a bit of damage. A large tree had fallen through the house. Another one fell on my guest cottage and another one on my workshop. So, out of three structures I had three hits. So, I knew that there was going to be a lot of work. I knew I had to do something to remedy the rather open spaces that I now had in my homes. Then unfortunately when I actually got up to the house I found that I had been looted and the back door had been pried open with a crowbar.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** This was in Mandeville?

**DAVID CARSTENS:** Yes, in Mandeville. So, it was standing wide open. At that point I decided that I was going to stay essentially. I did drive back to Baton Rouge one more night because my wife was there. We came home the following day and just stayed. The only good news I had at that time was when I went to check on my boat, my boat had ridden the storm out just fine. That was the good part of it. The bad part was I had this massive hole in the roof of my house. I spent the first 4 or 5 days after the storm trying to cover up the hole in case it rained, trying to make it dry. I was able to procure the services of a large crane to get the tree off of my house and the workshop. Essentially it was at that point, I was able to close the hole in enough that I thought it would at least survive a storm which we of course had a few weeks later with Rita. That proved to be quite a test of my ability to gather the water and channel it as opposed to keeping it out.

At that point I had been in contact with Bill Parsons out here at the Center. I knew that he had taken over for Admiral Donaldson. I told him what I was doing and as soon as I was able to stabilize my own home I would be in to work. He assured me that that would be fine. I don't know exactly what day it was when I was able to come back. The following Tuesday or Wednesday, a lot of days ran together during this, I came out here to the Center and started figuring out what was going on. At that time, Bill asked me to take over and help coordinate with the Navy an effort that they termed, "Stennis helping Stennis." I became the NASA representative to that effort and eventually became the head of that effort as the Navy pulled back some. I essentially led that effort from the time we came back. We rather formalized what the Navy had started as a rather ad hoc effort to help some of their employees who had had damaged to their homes and other folks who were at work to go back to their homes and help them try to stabilize their homes so that they would feel more reasonable about coming back to work and getting back involved in what they should be doing, the Navy work. We basically expanded that to all of the Stennis Family including the NASA, Navy and all of the Navy contingencies

that are here. All of the other agencies that are on-site and we opened it up for people to do two things: 1. To request help, we tried to categorize those requests for help as to whether they needed tree removal services or debris help or just general labor or whether they needed heavy equipment or whatever it was they happened to need. On the flip side of that, we tried to sign-up volunteers. There were people who were willing to actually go out and perform all those tasks. We organized it by community. It ended up being by county or parish and that turned out to be the best fit after a while. Some of these things just evolved. It's not a rigid kind of thing. You start it and when something doesn't work quite right, you just change it around until you get it to where it works. That's true of a lot of massive volunteer efforts.

In the end, we had a tremendous number of requests for services and a tremendous outpouring of help from a lot of different sources. A number of reserve units signed up to come down and help us with the relief effort. The John C. Stennis Aircraft Carrier sent several groups of people down here in groups of like 25 at a time. They stayed at the FEMA Camp that was setup on-site and went out and worked in the peoples' homes and the community. We didn't restrict it just to the Stennis employees. If the group went out and you had 7 or 8 people out there working in an area and the person's neighbor needed something done and if they could get it done, they did it. There was one time when one of the tree cutting crews cut 50 trees off of an elementary school because that's what was needed in the community. There was a tremendous amount of work accomplished not just for the Stennis employees but for the communities in which they lived. That was an essential element of the effort in my opinion. We tried to make very judicious use of heavy equipment. We tried to restrict the use of that to just where it was needed and just to bring somebody back to work. We had in the end close to a 1,000 requests for assistance.

As you know, there were over a thousand people at the site out of 4,500 that came out here had lost their homes or had major damage to their homes and they couldn't live in them. Many of these requests were from those people. Some of the people just needed a tree removed or debris removed from their home because it was flooded or sometimes they just needed something dragged out of the way so that they could park a trailer in their driveway and live in their trailer or to get their utilities turned back on or whatever the case happened to be. We were able to lend some assistance to virtually everyone who made a request.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** How many volunteers were there and how long did this go on?

**DAVID CARSTENS:** We had about 300 volunteers sign-up in the 1<sup>st</sup> month. We kept track of those and where they were and when they could work and when they couldn't work. When they had work to do out here that was government business they performed that duty. Much of the effort was done after hours. If you weren't doing essential work out here and your supervisor allowed you to be gone, you could do it during the daytime. When the reserve units came in from the Navy and they started working some things, we lost track of exactly how many that was because they came in and out very frequently and sometimes they were working for the "Stennis helping Stennis" effort and sometimes

they were working in other efforts that was going on in the community. So it was hard to judge that but I would say approximately 500 different people were doing the effort at any one time. We probably had about 200 going at one time and people came and went with that process as their jobs became more essential out here they had to drop off of the volunteer list to do work and other people came on and helped.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** Have you ever been involved in anything like this before?

**DAVID CARSTENS:** Not to this extent. I was in the Peace Corps a long time ago so I was involved in a lot of voluntary work. We did a lot of coordinating of community efforts when we were in the Peace Corps. We would get volunteers from that community to build wells, tanks or whatever it might be. As I was leaving the Peace Corps, we were in a typhoon. In the Pacific they call it a typhoon. We were involved in a typhoon of a pretty similar size. The difference being the land mass wasn't there to hit so it was mostly on the ocean. It didn't do nearly the extent of damage that Katrina did. No, I have not been anywhere near this level of devastation like this. It's pretty hard to take at times.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** Were you surprised by any one thing as far as the amount of the destruction or the kind of response that there was to it? Nobody around here has been through this kind of thing before. So many people used Hurricane Camille as a gauge and they thought they were O.K. and they weren't.

**DAVID CARSTENS:** That's just it. None of these storms are ever the same. Camille was more intense but much smaller. Katrina was much larger and carried the storm surge that I think caught an awful lot of people by surprise. The bottom-line for me is it's very difficult to describe to someone the extent of this damage. When you go down to the Gulf Coast and I've been a lot of places since then. In the city of New Orleans, there was a lot of flooding but it was just that. The water rose. It stayed up there for some long period of time and then went back down but on the Gulf Coast you had the surge and you did have that in Plaquemines Parish also by the way, but you had the surge that really was so destructive if you will and it was brought out to me when I went to a person's house in Bay St. Louis who lived about between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> block from the Gulf. His was the first house that was standing. There had been three or almost 4 blocks of homes that just weren't there anymore and his house was moved 10 feet off of its foundation. It didn't stop there but that's when it started to slow down. The devastation is just amazing to me. The really astounding part of it is it goes for 150 miles on the Coast. The extent of damage is extended so far. I've had the opportunity to take a number of people down there. The IGs that were coming here to look at how we are spending the supplemental appropriations. You can tell from their reaction that they don't get it until they see that level of total devastation and to me the one IG summed it up perfectly, "I really didn't understand this until I could smell it." The smell of it is what drives it home. It's that olfactory sense that kind of drives it home to you and says, "Boo". This is real and it's not going to be easy to recover from. The recovery effort for the Gulf and for the city of New Orleans will take years if it ever recovers all the way.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** People don't see much of it on the news anymore. They just think everything is O.K. How do you feel about that?

**DAVID CARSTENS:** I think the American public has a very short attention span and frankly if they are not willing to spend the money that it is going to take to redo the levee system in the city of New Orleans which will be about 30 to 32 billion dollars, I think the city has a good chance of withering. I think that is going to be a pretty sad day. We spent about \$300 billion on terrorist attacks and homeland security and beefing up all this security and you have to ask yourself why did we spend that money? Well, what's the worse thing a terrorist could do? Wipe out one of our cities. We're going to wipe out one of our cities by not letting it recover if we don't spend that \$30 billion. The terrorists aren't going to have to do a thing. We're going to do it to ourselves. What if it would have been Washington, D.C. or Miami, Houston? This could have been anywhere. You just wonder whether we have the fortitude if you will to shell it out and to recover. I think it will be a very sad day in this country if the American public, and frankly it has to be the President; the President has to put pressure on Congress to get this done. That's the only person with the power enough to do this. It will be a pretty sad statement, a very sad legacy to leave if we don't follow through and recover from it.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** How would you categorize the effort here at Stennis? Obviously you were very closely involved with the recovery effort. There were a lot people doing a lot of different things. There were a lot of people here. How are we doing?

**DAVID CARSTENS:** Frankly, I think that the Stennis community, you couldn't have asked for a better response from every individual who stepped up and was here to do what needed to be done work wise to carry that off to the people who volunteered in their own communities to get it done and to help. It was from those people that really the effort to relieve this whole area germinated. I think it is going to be a tremendous boom to the Gulf Coast because those people will need a break but they're not going to let their community sit there and idle. Somebody has to be a driving force to get the community moving towards the resolution of a lot of issues on having to do with rebuilding. It's the people here at Stennis that are one of the main sources of that, the energy and the resources that it's going to take to do that. It's going to take a lot of effort but these folks love this community and they're going to help it rebuild. I think the Gulf Coast is going to come back. I'm hoping that the city to our West doesn't get left out also. There has to be a federal effort there and then there has to be a lot of private effort there as well.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** Are there any major lessons learned for you either here or personally?

**DAVID CARSTENS:** I won't have so many trees. *Laughter...* Yea, we do lessons learned. I'm disciplined to do that at my work and that discipline carries over into my private life. We have already developed a list of things that we would take with us, that we would safeguard if this happened again. We have already developed a plan to minimize the type of damage we sustained this time. We did things like put all of our important papers in plastic bags and secured them all and then put them up on the 2<sup>nd</sup>

floor of our home in case there was flooding. As it turned out, we didn't have any flooding we had a tree fall on the top of our house which exposed those very things that we were trying to safeguard the most. Yea, we have changed a number of things. Before hurricane season, there will be some more changes. I will have a much more secure system for my doors so that people can't pry them open and loot. All of those things will be in place by next year. Some of them are already in place. We are still rebuilding. Once we get done rebuilding we'll strengthen it. We'll be ready next time.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** What about your role here at Stennis? Is there anything you would tell the next person who might have to do what you had to do in the recovery?

**DAVID CARSTENS:** Ask for help. Try to formulate a plan and then really ask for people to help you. So many people are there willing, ready to help, ready to do things and nobody has asked them for anything. Well, ask them. Trust me; if they don't want to do it, they're not going to do it. So many of them are ready and eager and they'll say they don't have any skills but can they lift. For those people who couldn't do those things, I had volunteer jobs of answering the phones and collecting data. We needed to save all of this stuff. We needed to coordinate things. We needed to call people. That was a very critical job. It didn't require any particular handyman skills or tree cutting skills. You have to have those people but you don't have to have very many of them. You need people who can follow and you need others who are just willing to help. We had lots of those people willing to do that. We had a lot of people volunteering to help from other places. They wanted to come down and help. If you could figure out a way to accommodate those people with this size tragedy, there were so many people that lived here that didn't have homes or a place to stay, to accommodate people coming from the outside, even if they were coming to help, it's difficult to accommodate. They almost have to be self-sufficient if they are going to come down. They are thinking that they can come down and stay in a hotel and go to a restaurant. There wasn't any of that. What very few hotels there were, were taken up by energy crews and contractors. There were thousands of people staying in all of the hotels and every possible living condition that you could come up with. Unless those folks are willing to come down here and be basically camping out, it's very hard for them to come and help.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** That's not to mention lack of communication, water, fuel. They come down; they're face with all of these things.

**DAVID CARSTENS:** They are faced with all of the things that the people here are faced with. That's exactly right. That's actually one of the big issues that we had - telecommunications. How do we communicate? For example, I even had the volunteer groups that would go out; we ended up having to get maps of the communities that had GPS coordinates on it. It would have been handy to have a number of portable GPS units. In the future maybe you won't need that - your cell phone will tell you where you are. There are no street signs out there. You go to somebody's house and you go to that 2<sup>nd</sup> left and that doesn't work or you go to the big tree and you realize that the big tree may not be there and the street signs aren't there. Nothing is there. You have to overlay the GPS maps on top of the normal roadmaps to be able to find out where you are.

**MARTIN ORAMOVS:** Even the basic landmarks are gone.

**DAVID CARSTENS:** That's right. There's no way to really figure it out. That was really very difficult. That was one of the benefits of having people who are familiar with the community lead the effort in that community because they were familiar with it and if they weren't right away then they slowly gained the new knowledge of what it takes to define where they are. That was pretty helpful. If you could harness the energy that the rest of the country had to help in this type of incident that would be marvelous. You need one group of people that all they are going to do is to come down and sustain the other groups of people that want to come down and help. If you have a big circus tent with cots in it and meals then that would be the ideal situation for all of those people to come down and help you do things.

**MARTIN ORAMOVS:** Is there anything that you can think of that we haven't talked about or touched on that impressed, touched or upset you?

**DAVID CARSTENS:** There were lots of things that touched me. Tragedies like this, situations like this, bring out people's true character. Sometimes that's really, really good and sometimes that's really, really bad. Out of all the damage to my house, the thing that bothered me the most was the fact that somebody broke into it and stole basically meaningless things which essentially I would have given them had they asked me for them. That was the thing that bothered me the most. That somebody was going to take advantage of this situation to get over on somebody else. That's a very sad thing for me. That bothered me for a long time but then you realize there are folks like that and they are going to do that. But, there are so many of the other folks that outweighed that - it gives you a much better feeling about mankind and humans than the other guys do. There are just a few of those rotten apples but they're there all the time. You just have to understand that they're going to be there. Deal with them, deal with them harshly and try to focus on the good stuff. Try not to expend a lot of energy on the negative. There's lots of good stuff that's going on.

**MARTIN ORAMOVS:** That's good. Great, unless you have anything else.

**DAVID CARSTENS:** I was able to get away from here for the first time just last week. That's a really necessary thing to do. You have got to quit looking at piles of debris after 3 or 4 months and go look at something pretty.

**MARTIN ORAMOVS:** I've gone places like that, places I've been before and everything is just normal like it was and everybody there is untouched. They are clueless.

**DAVID CARSTENS:** They don't get it. When the IG came down we talked with them and they were saying they had to look at the money and wanted to know how we made these decisions. People making these decisions in the harshest of environments and they're just trying to make the best decision they can make for the good of the community but the IGs, their job is to make sure you did full and open competition. They

asked, “How did you do this and how did you do that?” You go, “Wait a minute. You aren’t quite getting the situation that we are in. Let’s go take a ride and let me show you what we have been dealing with.” After that, they understood a little bit better what people are doing.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** Impossible to describe.

**DAVID CARSTENS:** In the end you have to do what’s best for the people. Each one of your people has an individual situation. You’ve got to deal with that. You have to get them back to where they feel positive about their life and feel the hope that there’s something that they can move on to. Until you do that, the rest of it isn’t going to work. There’s nothing there for them. If you can give them the hope and they can visualize that tomorrow where there may be a different normal but it’s normal, they’ll come around. They will be a part of the positive movement to get themselves, the community, Stennis, everybody back on track. By the way, Bill Parsons was right on the money when he said, “We’ve got to take care of our folks.” That’s the #1 priority and I think that is the right thing to do.

**MARTIN ORAMOUS:** O.K. Thank you.

*(End of Interview)*